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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES PUBLIC COUNCIL WITH CHAIR MANUKIAN

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Armenian Public Council, created by the GOAM to serve as an interface between government bodies and the public, will review and advise parliament on every draft law prior to legislative consideration, council chairman and former Prime Minister Vazgen Manukian told the Ambassador. Public interest in the council has been intense, according to Manukian, though the body will need to overcome significant skepticism if it is to overcome its early reputation as a convenient tool of the government in steering "public debate." END SUMMARY.

ADVISE AND DISSENT?

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador met with the Chairperson of the Armenian Public Council, Vazgen Manukian, on July 17 to discuss the composition and purpose of the new advisory body. President Sargsian created the Public Council, comprised of representatives of political and non-governmental organizations, as a forum for dialogue with the opposition and other segments of society in order to defuse tensions following Armenia's March 2008 election. Manukian, a former Prime Minister (1990-1991) and Minister of Defense (1992-1993) became Chairman of the Public Council on May 31.

¶3. (SBU) Manukian asserted that, although the council will serve only an advisory role, it could prove influential. The 36-member council (one-third appointed by the President, one-third delegated by NGOs, with the remaining third elected by the first two groups) will review every draft law prior to consideration by parliament and will have a representative in every parliamentary committee. The council's most notable contribution to date was its recommendation to the President that he grant amnesty to those arrested in connection with the 2008 post-presidential-election violence. (COMMENT: It is widely held that Sargsian directed the recommendation of the council so that he could claim he was responding to the "public" rather than opposition and international pressure. END COMMENT)

ENTHUSIASM BORN OF ALIENATION

¶4. (SBU) The level of interest in the Public Council has been surprising, according to Manukian. Over a period of two months, 1,530 delegates from over 900 NGOs participated in the process of electing the NGO representatives to the council, he noted. Manukian attributed this enthusiasm to popular alienation with both the government and the opposition. "The majority don't love the authorities, but LTP (opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrossian) is not an alternative for many either," he said. "Since 1995, not a single election result has been accepted by the populace, but many believe

in the council," he added.

15. (SBU) Beyond its most basic structure, the Public Council is very much a work in progress, according to the chairman. It could take its direction from the President (as with the amnesty); from the council's commission experts; or from the public. In the near term, he foresees the council weighing in on a wide range of issues, from recommending wholesale reforms to law enforcement and judicial structures, to advising on the expansion of small aircraft aviation, to advancing the public dialogue concerning rapprochement with Turkey (a position he said he would strongly, publicly support). For further clarity in defining the aims and methods of the body, Manukian said he hoped he could learn from the experiences of similar bodies in other countries, including in the U.S.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Although a respected political figure, Manukian's political influence is modest these days. Critics say he has been co-opted in chairing a body meant to give political cover to actions the President wants to take anyway, e.g., the amnesty. And while many acknowledge the Public Council could play a useful role, thus far it has elicited more skepticism that this is yet another Russian tool imported to manage Armenia's democracy than hope that it will prove a useful mechanism to increase the role of the people in governing Armenia. END COMMENT

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